

History Graduation Speech

Welcome! Thank you all for coming to our beautiful campus to celebrate the success of my fellow graduates, and congratulations to the class of 2014! My name is Simon Stokes and I have the pleasure of graduating with a double major in European History and Human Biology.

Many of my fellow premeds ask me, “Why history? What does that have to do with medicine?” Superficially, these are good questions. However, I believe that studying history has been the most valuable asset in my academic career.

Professor Alan Christy, one of our faculty of Japanese History, summed up the importance of the humanities in his Ed Talk last fall. While Professor David Haussler is conquering cancer with personalized genomics and Terry Root is saving endangered species, how does the historian compete? As Alan said, “My goal is nothing less than to bring peace to the world.”

This goal may seem lofty and oddly reminiscent of a Miss America pageant, but my time interacting with faculty and students in the history department has taught me that this goal is tangible. History teaches us to critically analyze the world around us; whether its issues of inequality, economics, public health, and quite literally anything. Unfortunately, deeper investigation only ever leads to more questions. But it is these questions that allow us to form deeper insights into the complex relationships between people and cultures. They encourage us to place ourselves in the shoes of others, both long deceased and those still shaping our world today. Ultimately, history has taught me empathy.

Memorizing biochemical pathways of molecular processes or synthesis reactions of organic compounds has by no means taught me to be humane. If any of you have seen me in the library chugging coffee, unshaved, and talking to myself, you know that this is me at my least sympathetic. Knowing how to calculate the rate by which enzymes catalyze reactions or how high a basketball will bounce when dropped from a 30 foot building will not make me a better doctor. Although science is my passion, it is the study of history that will provide me with the tools to empathize with my future patients. It will provide me the ability to step outside my beliefs, prejudices, and preconceptions in order to better understand people and develop relationships that reach far beyond lab results and impersonal patient reports.

It is precisely these realizations that have driven me to pursue history and is exactly what the UCSC History Department attempts to bestow upon their students. They have invested their blood, sweat, and tears into training us to be more conscientious, open-minded, and respectful individuals. It is through their passion and dedication that I have built confidence in myself and learned how to develop and defend my beliefs. They have taught us to be moral, by showing us history’s examples of humans at their most depraved and cruel. They have taught us to be hopeful for an even brighter future, by analyzing the progression of human rights towards greater equality. This is what Professor Christy means by promoting world peace.

I will cherish my experiences at UCSC and I am happy knowing that I have made lifelong friends with my peers and have gained lifelong mentors from the history staff. I am leaving Santa Cruz with the knowledge that my education here will prove invaluable for my future endeavors. The lessons in humanity that I have received during my time here have encouraged me to take Alan's goal seriously and I am proud to start my service in Nepal as a Peace Corps Volunteer this September. I know that the values I have learned here will provide me with the motivation and skillsets to continue bettering myself and the world around me.

I want to take this time to thank my family, my professors, my administrators, and my friends for their ceaseless support. I could not have done it without you. Congratulations class of 2014 and good luck navigating the confusing waters of postgraduate life!

Thank you.